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“TODAY THIS SCRIPTURE IS FULFILLED IN YOUR HEARING”  
THE PRACTICE OF SUSTAINED *LECTIO DIVINA*

Kathleen A. Cahalan, Ph.D.

I have been practicing some form of *lectio divina* since sixth grade. As a child, I somehow had the desire to read the whole Bible from beginning to end. I started but found that since I knew the first few stories it might be better to begin in another place. I happened upon Ecclesiastes, but did not get far. The text was strange and I could not understand it. My attempt faltered and I never made it all the way through that book or the Bible.

Around the same time, I realized that there was a way to read the Bible through the daily lectionary. In our grade school, we planned and attended mass once a week with our class and it is probably there that I was exposed to the “reading of the day.” I thought whole books were read, with a selection each day, and that if you followed along you would eventually read an entire book. (It was years before I learned of a three-year cycle and that the lectionary comprises only a small portion of the Hebrew Bible and New Testament.) Nevertheless, I decided to follow along with these readings but I did not have a Bible at home. I was often in church after school practicing my organ lessons, and I decided that I could “borrow” a missalette, take it home, and copy down the list of readings for each day. I would return the missalette the next day, so did not consider it a significant act of theft. I purchased The Jerusalem Bible at a religious bookstore in our downtown and this is how I began to pray the scriptures each day. I understood it to be

a very catholic prayer since I was joining with people all over the world who were reading the same texts with me for the day.

When I was 16 years old, I began reading spiritual literature and among the first was Henri Nouwen's book, *Genessee Diary*, the story of his nine-month stay at a Trappist monastery. He learns to pray the liturgy of the hours and discovers the mystery of immersing himself daily in the scriptures. He learns of Thomas Merton's desire to memorize the psalms and the New Testament, and like Nouwen, the first psalm I memorized was Psalm 4, which I began to say at bedtime. Moreover, I discovered daily prayer with scripture that shapes morning and evening liturgy.

A second influential book was, *You: Prayer for Beginners*, by Mark Link, S.J. You, a little "how-to" book for beginners, which demonstrated how to pray with scripture in a simple format. The method, I now know, was *lectio divina*, though Link did not use that language. He taught how to read a passage slowly, savoring words or phrases and rereading the passage several times and returning to it throughout the day. He also combined *lectio divina* with the Ignatian examen as an evening practice.

If you practice *lectio divina*, I am sure you have also tried different approaches—reading the daily readings for mass, memorizing a psalm, or slow repetitive reading. Over many years of practice, I have come to understand *lectio* as any approach in which we have a dialogue with God through the biblical text.

Today I practice sustained *lectio*, which means that I stay with a text, or better yet, the text stays with me, for days or weeks. The method involves listening to different voices of the text: the literal voice, or the historical context, author, and audience that created the text; the symbolic voice, the meaning of particular words and symbols; and the moral voice, God's call to me personally through the text. In this essay, I show how I engaged these voices in the text with a selection from the Gospel of Luke, which I began

reading in Advent 2016. Through days and weeks of encountering Jesus in Luke 3-5, I came to a new understanding of *lectio divina* and my daily encounter with scripture.

## PRAYING WITH JESUS

### JESUS IS BAPTIZED (3:21-22)

The baptism scene in Luke (3:21-22) is rather succinct but its message is powerful. Jesus, who has been baptized, is sitting in prayer. The voice of God assures him: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” Two lines. Surprisingly, Luke omits many common details: that Jesus came from Nazareth, was baptized in the Jordan, by John, and is coming out of the water. Here he is in a quiet moment in prayer. This is the first of a key Lukan theme: Jesus is at prayer in critical moments in this life.<sup>2</sup>

Why is this story so different from Mark and Matthew? In Mark, the baptism is the inaugural moment and intends to tell the reader who Jesus is. In contrast, Luke has two chapters, the “infancy narratives,” where Jesus is named “Savior,” “Lord,” “Messiah,” “Son of David” and “Son of God.” Luke has answered the question about Jesus’ identity. The Baptism scene carries through that same message but further emphasizes that baptism is an anointing by the Spirit, a second key Lukan theme.<sup>3</sup> Peter proclaims that Jesus’ ministry begins with “how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power” (Acts 10:37-38).<sup>4</sup> The descent of the Spirit, then, marks Jesus’ baptism as distinct from the baptism offered by John.<sup>5</sup>

Several key symbols of the Spirit connect with ancient images. The dove is associated with the people of Israel (Hos 11:11, Ps 68:14) and is a messenger of peace and liberation (e.g., olive branch). And, the opening of the heavens (3:21) recalls the

prophet Isaiah's plea that God come down to save the people (Isaiah 64:1). For Luke, Jesus is the fulfillment of Israel's expectations and God's promise to bring peace, freedom, and deliverance.<sup>6</sup>

### PRAYING WITH JESUS

As I read this passage during my *lectio*, I realize that Christian prayer begins with sitting down to pray with Jesus who is already at prayer. I am joining him and he joins my prayer to his. The great liturgical reformer, Josef Jungmann, in his ground-breaking work, *The Place of Christ in Liturgical Prayer*, in 1925, demonstrates that the earliest forms of Christian prayer were through Jesus to the Father. He contrasted this form to later developments in which Christians prayed to Jesus, thereby emphasizing his divinity, which Jungmann believed was an overreaction stemming from the Arian controversy.<sup>7</sup> The true pattern of prayer, he wrote, was to follow Origen's dictum that prayer is "to the Father of all through Jesus Christ and in the Holy Spirit." Jungmann, stressing the early Christian view of Christ as mediator, impels us to pray in, with, and through Christ, not so much to Christ.<sup>8</sup>

I have always been drawn to his insight from the first time I learned it. Imagine that each time we sit down to pray, it is the moment after our baptism—the moment we were washed clean and joined to Christ and His Body. We are joined to that one Body both in the church's communal prayer as well as in our private *lectio*. Reading this passage, it hit me: we are sitting here together. I am sitting with Jesus to pray with him, as at the moment of baptism.

### JESUS READS THE SCRIPTURE (LUKE 4:16-30)

Then, Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, goes to the

wilderness for 40 days, and after being tempted he leaves and is “filled with the power of the Spirit,” and returns to Galilee (4:1-12). Interestingly, whereas Mark has the story about Jesus’ trip to Nazareth at the end of his Galilean ministry, Luke has moved it to the opening event as Jesus’ inaugural address at the outset of his ministry. Up to this point, Jesus has only conversed with the devil, but now he is to stand among his own people and read to them (4:16ff).

Jesus goes to teach in the synagogue, an important Lukan theme, which emphasizes that Jesus is a faithful Jew: this gospel begins and ends in the Temple.<sup>9</sup> What Luke recounts in this scene would have been common synagogue practice at the time: singing a psalm, reciting the Shema, reading from the Torah or Prophets, offering a sermon expounding the Scriptures, and concluding with a blessing. Jesus would have been invited by the president of the synagogue to read and offer a sermon. He is handed the scroll of Isaiah and a passage would have been assigned for that day (perhaps there was a cycle of readings), but it seems as though he deliberately chooses this chapter and verse. As the reader he would stand for the reading and sit for the exposition (4:16, 20).

Before turning to the message, which is generally the focus of this passage, I am struck by Jesus’ actions: he went to the synagogue, stood up to read, the scroll is given to him, he unrolls it, finds the place...speaks...rolls it up, gives it back, sits down, began to speak. Why is Luke taking so much time to describe Jesus’ behavior?

Eugene LaVerdiere notes that Luke “uses meaningless details to frame the reading from Isaiah. These details create a feeling of expectation, heighten the importance and intensity of the actual reading, and graphically focus the assembly’s attention on Jesus.”<sup>10</sup> But I beg to differ—this is not a theater script, a mere set up for the main message. Jesus’ movements captivate me. In

fact, the movement is the message: I see a man who is deliberate and intentional in each of his movements as he prepares to read the Word. He knows what he is doing as he prepares to read, speak, and receive. He is careful, slow, patient, and observant. I realize how much my own actions as I do my pray and work do not mirror his.

Fully prepared now to read the Word, Jesus then reads a passage from Isaiah 61:1-2, which points to God's work in a new time. The exile is over and a new calling is emerging.<sup>11</sup>

*Lectio*, I come to understand, is receiving the Word from the Word and with the Word. The words Jesus proclaims, the message from this passage, is generally the focus of most sermons and rightly so—he proclaims “good news.” Jesus emphasizes his anointing as a prophet, not a king (also like Elisha and Elijah referred to in this passage), and alludes to his baptism as an anointing (4:18). His ministry will be prophetic and he is consciously aware of the influence of the Spirit upon him. What was announced in Isaiah's time, Jesus is declaring now: the past prediction is fulfilled in the person, words, and deeds of Jesus. This good news is for the “the poor,” which includes the economically disadvantaged as well as all outcasts. Isaiah was announcing consolation to various groups in the postexilic community, but Jesus is bringing back those in a different kind of exile, the exile of being outside the community. The “Lord's favor” will take place through Jesus' exorcisms, healings, and teachings.<sup>12</sup> This good news is for me too.

And yet, the text reads me as well. It exposes my afflictions, helps me see them for what they are, and I beg for release. The text of Scripture becomes, as Saint Athanasius says, “a mirror in which may be seen the movements of one's own soul.”<sup>13</sup> I am now the scroll that Jesus reads. He has unrolled me.

And, then, Jesus proclaims: “Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” Generally the term “fulfilled” or

“fulfillment” points to completeness and accomplishment and Luke sees this in both past, present, and future events. The promises from the past have come to completion so that Elizabeth can proclaim “Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord” (1:45).

The present too is whole and complete. It is as if, when we sit to do our *lectio*, Jesus is saying to us, “I have always wanted to tell you this.” The Word is coming to its fulfillment in this place and time. According to Christine Paintner, “The ancient desert fathers and mothers believed that the Hebrew and Christian scriptures were like a love letter written to us by God. The texts speak to us in this unique moment of our lives, wherever we find ourselves. Each time we come to the text we are in a new place and the text responds directly to what is happening in this moments.”<sup>14</sup>

The way forward, into the future, is living out the Word. Jesus teaches, “My mother and brother are those who hear the word of God and do it” (Luke 8:21) and “Blessed are those who hear the word of God and obey it” (Luke 11:28). In this sense fulfillment takes place in the future. The Word has come to heal, teach, liberate, release, and the Word sends us to do the same. We have heard and received that word, we respond to it, and it returns to the Father now and in its future manifestation (See Isaiah 55:10-11).

Jesus and I are revealed to each other in the reading of the Word. Jesus is the fulfillment of all God’s promises and every time I sit and pray with Jesus, he brings his Word to fulfillment in my hearing. Now it is up to me to follow.<sup>15</sup>

## RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Luke has placed this story at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry in order to encapsulate the entire ministry and people’s reaction to it. It foreshadows Simeon’s prophetic statement, “This



child is destined for the falling and the rising of many” (2:34).

#### REJECTING THE WORD

Luke captures two primary reactions to Jesus’ teaching and healings: amazement (4:22) and fury (4:28). Initially the crowd embraces Jesus as their own, but then his message of good news brings judgment upon them, and they react harshly, even violently (Heb 4:12). It seems wrong and unjust that widows who were hungry and lepers who were sick would not be cured by the prophets; rather, Gentiles are cured (Luke 4:25-26). Jealousy, envy, bitterness—these thoughts take control of Jesus’ listeners. They are bound by their own afflictions of anger and hatred.<sup>16</sup>

What are they rejecting? Those who had gathered that day would have assumed that Jesus’ mission was to the Jews. But he affirms that his prophetic mission is to move to the Gentile world. His universal mission has begun and will extend to “the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). He claims that God’s salvation reaches beyond his Jewish listeners to include Gentiles and outcasts, and he implies that his activity would have better results among those groups. His audience’s rejection leads to rage and violence and they want to cast him out of town (4:29), an allusion to the location of the crucifixion (23:26).<sup>17</sup>

#### JESUS RESPONDS

The second part of the story focuses on Jesus’ reaction to amazement, fury and rage.<sup>18</sup> He is not taken in by either: amazement could lead to his vainglory and pride, and fury could lead to rage. But Jesus has no afflictions. His ego and desires do not control him. He passes through their midst (4:30). This is not magic; his movement reveals something deeper. Jesus’ intentionally

moves through their sin to fulfill his mission. He passes through the afflictions and moves on from rejection to preach and heal. And so, if my afflictions keep me from following him, he cannot stay; but if turn these afflictions over to prayer, he is ready to heal.

In fact, the next three stories in Luke continue in action what he just taught. He rebukes false power three times: a demon, a fever, and another demon (4:31-41). At this point, he overcomes these powers, but Luke foreshadows here that afflictions of hatred, anger, and resentment will ultimately kill him. Just as the people rejected the good news in their midst, so our afflictions stand between us and following the Word.

## **FOLLOWING ON THE WAY**

The story ends with two of Luke's favorite images, both of which are key to *lectio divina*. First, is "the Way."<sup>19</sup> The phrase carries several meanings in Luke's writings: the way to Galilee to conduct his ministry (4:14-9:50); the way to Jerusalem and the cross (9:50-24:53); and the way of the disciples in preaching the good news about his death and resurrection (Acts), which we continue to follow today.

Second, is the "word of God," a phrase peculiar to Luke.<sup>20</sup> At the beginning of chapter 5, Luke tells us that people are "pressing in on him to hear the word of God" (5:1). Here the person and message are one. The Word that comes to dwell among us, preaches "the word of God" to us.

*Lectio divina* is how we follow him "on the way" in our daily personal prayer; here is where we set out, as one of the crowd today, to "press in on him to hear the word of God" (5:1).

## **SUSTAINED LECTIO DIVINA**

Christians today practice *lectio divina* in a variety of ways and one method is sustained *lectio divina*, which Mary Margaret Funk describes as “a sustained immersion into a revelatory text.” In other words, it is a dialogue with God through the text over time.

The practice, as Funk describes, includes listening to several voices of the text.<sup>21</sup> First, is the literal voice. We hear the literal voice by studying the text and understanding the world that shaped it. We turn to the study of scripture and examine questions such as who wrote this text? Where and why? What type of literature is it? What do certain words mean in their original language and context? In this *lectio*, I turned to several commentaries on the gospel of Luke by respected biblical scholars to help me understand the author, his context, audience, and point of view.

I have always loved the study of scripture and one thing that drew me to this method of prayer is that it invites me to use my intellect. As part of *lectio*, understanding helps lead us into prayer, but it is not an end in itself. The great medieval scholar, Jean Leclercq, says: “Christian reading of Scripture is not primarily an intellectual exercise resulting from the correct use of a scientific method. It is essentially an experience of Christ, in the Spirit. Within this experience there is, of course, room for method, science and use of instruments of work and study, the knowledge of philology, archeology and history. But these alone will never result in *lectio divina*, a Christian reading, a reading in the Spirit, a reading of Christ and in Christ, with Christ and for Christ.”<sup>22</sup>

A reading in the Spirit, as Leclercq notes, is what brings forth the symbolic meaning, which we cannot obtain by reading more commentaries. The symbolic voice expresses the meanings of the text, or the symbols in the text evoke meanings that must be encountered, not rationally deduced. In the Alexandrian school

and throughout history, this voice has been called the allegorical, Christological, typological, symbolic, spiritual, and the hidden. For Origen, the words in scripture point to something else, their meanings lying beneath the surface. These are “forms and figures of hidden, sacred things” and even when one does not understand them, we can sense intuitively that *something* is there.<sup>23</sup> The symbols in the text are evocative and require uncovering. In Luke’s story, several hidden meanings emerged for me, most particularly Jesus’ actions in reading the Scriptures.

Another important voice is the moral voice, which asks: What does this text mean for me today? What is God asking of me through this text? What is my personal response? Raymond Studzinski writes, “In the process of connecting with the creative action of God, lectio is a form of proclaiming the Word (especially the Scriptures) or of preaching to the self. Each word is brought to bear on life with its present challenges and opportunities. In this sense readers, in effect, preach to themselves, actualizing the text in terms of their life context.”<sup>24</sup> Through writing in a journal, I carry on a conversation with myself and with Jesus to figure out what the Word is calling me to say and do.

Like the community gathered in the synagogue that day, I am both amazed at Jesus’ message and filled with fury. The text brings both good news and judgment to me. I am called to renounce my sins and afflictions. The good news is that God wants to heal my afflictions in order that I can be a witness to this good news. As Funk notes, the personal sense of the text has three dimensions: “first we humbly repent, remove obstacles to our relationship; second, we might pray from our hearts and souls; third, we simply do the word, as in charity or personal outreach toward the poor.”<sup>25</sup>

With no effort or ability, I wait upon the mystical voice, which comes as a sheer gift from God.

## CONCLUSION

My childhood dream came true, but not in the way I imagined. It's taken me many months to read these few chapters and listen to them.

By spending a long summer with them, I came to know that all prayer is prayer with Jesus to the Holy One. When we sit to do our *lectio*, Jesus is praying with us, we are praying with him. We can trust that he lifts our prayers up to God.

And *lectio* is the way in which Jesus reads the Scripture to us. Jesus is the scroll unrolled and the word read. The Word proclaims the Word personally to each of us. The Word reveals to me the Holy One.

And as I read, I realize: Jesus is the Word that reads the text of my life – this Word shows me myself.

*Lectio divina* is following the Word on his way, and pressing in on him to listen to the Word among us.

## Notes

1. This paper is modified from a lecture delivered at Saint Paul Monastery, Saint Paul, Minnesota, on October 27, 2017.
2. These moments include the Infancy Narratives: hymns of praise by Mary (1:46-55), Zechariah (1:68-79), and Simeon (2:29-32); the Baptism (3:21); Jesus taking breaks in his ministry (5:16); Calling the disciples (6:12 and 9:18); the Transfiguration occurs while Jesus is praying (9:28-29); Jesus gives instructions on prayer (11:1-13; 18:14); he prays at Gethsemane (22:41) and on the cross (23:46).
3. Luke mentions the Holy Spirit 14 times, more than either Mark or Matthew. The Spirit plays a central role in Jesus' birth, baptism, ministry, and the gospel's conclusion (1:35, 3:22, 4:1, 14; 24:49). In the first chapter of Acts (1:1-26), the Spirit is referred to four times..

4. This passage alludes to Isa 61:1, the verse Jesus reads in Luke 4.
5. The themes of God's identification of Jesus as "Son" and the descent of the Spirit at the beginning of Jesus' ministry are interesting because, as Joseph Fitzmyer notes, neither of these would have been associated with the Jewish Messiah. Luke makes both the anointing and the naming key to Jesus' uniqueness and calling as Messiah. Another key theme is Jesus' superiority over John the Baptist—by virtue of the Holy Spirit (a theme Luke develops in chapters 1 and 2) Jesus is coming to do new things. While John is a prophet who announces repentance, and preparation for one greater than him, Jesus' baptism is of the Holy Spirit. Joseph Fitzmyer, *Gospel of Luke, Vol 1., Anchor Bible Commentary*.
6. Eugene LaVerdiere, *Luke*, (William Glazier, 1980), 61.
7. Joseph Jungmann, S.J., *The Place of Christ in Liturgical Prayer* (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 1925.)
8. Quoted in *The Place of Christ in Liturgical Prayer: Trinity, Christology, and Liturgical Theology*, ed. Bryan D. Spinks (Liturgical Press, 2008) 3.
9. Luke 1:8 and 24:53. In Acts, the apostles and early Christians are also in the Temple (Acts 2:46, 3:1, 4:1, 5:12, 42; 21:26).
10. LaVerdiere, *Luke*, 67.
11. Second Isaiah (Chs 40-66) focuses on the joyful return that is anticipated from the Babylonian exile (40-55, @539 BCE) which includes the suffering servant hymns; the third section (chpts 56-66) come at later date (530-510 BCE), a post-restoration period, and emphasizes God's transcendence and the reality of life in the restored community.
12. Jesus stops before reading the Isaiah's announcement of the divine day of vengeance (61:2b), which is not part of Luke's story of Jesus, whose emphasis is on salvation. Luke drops other details too, (e.g., "to heal the broken-hearted").
13. Quoted in Michael Casey, *Sacred Reading: The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina*, (Triumph Books, 1996) 30.
14. Christine Painter, *Lectio Divina: The Sacred Art* (Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths, 2012) 8.

15. Journal, 7.6.17.
16. On the relationship between lectio divina and afflictions, see Kathleen A. Cahalan, “Unknowing,” in *Christian Practical Wisdom: What It Is, Why It Matters*, Dorothy C. Bass, Kathleen A. Cahalan, Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, James N. Nieman, and Christian Scharen (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub., 2016).
17. Fitzmyer. See Hebrews 4:12.
18. Ironically, the effort to destroy Jesus led to his glorification – he must suffer to enter his glory, so they did in fact glorify him. LaVerdiere, Luke, 67.
19. The verb *poreuesthai* is used seven times in Luke. It was also the earliest designation for Christians about their movement, which Luke uses in Acts 9:2.
20. Luke uses the phrase five times in the gospel (3:2, 5:1, 8:11, 8:21, 11:28) and 14 times in Acts.
21. See Mary Margaret Funk, OSB, *Lectio Matters: Before the Burning Bush* (New York: Continuum, 2010). Funk retrieves the approach to scripture taught by the Alexandrian Catechetical School in which the literal and spiritual senses of the text were studied.
22. Quoted in Raymond Studzinski, *Reading to Live: The Evolving Practice of Lectio Divina* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009) 191.
23. Quoted in Studzinski, *Reading to Live*, 30.
24. *Ibid.*, 215.
25. Funk, *Lectio Matters*, 47.